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Title: Self-fashioning by African American and Caribbean Women Poets: A Study of Select Poets of the Sixties and After

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Synopsis

In spite of a rich cultural and artistic tradition in the African American as well as Caribbean communities neither poets nor their works have obtained enough critical attention that they should have received. It is as if Thomas Jefferson's words that the poems of Phillis Weatley are "below the dignity of criticism" (Norton: xxxvii) still ring loud in the minds of critics. For a long time this was the attitude of 'academia', primarily dominated by white intellectuals. Although from the Massachusetts trial room of Wheatley to the present age intellectual journal assessment African Americans and Caribbean literati had to struggle in order to prove that the 'works' are not only genuine but also critically as worthy as any other literary achievement. From the slave narratives, the flourishing artistic accomplishments during the Harlem Renaissance, establishment of various organisations throughout the USA to the abolitionists and early women right activists like Sojourner Truth African Americans as well as African Caribbeans were progressing slowly but steadily in every aspects of socio-cultural and of course literary segregation. Yet even now perhaps, considering African American Literature as a distinguished and dignified literary tradition, poetry has not gained enough critical attention in comparison with other genres of American literature. On the other hand, Caribbean literary tradition is much less well defined and suffers from the same problems of lack of literary attention. It is not even well anthologised save its critical evaluation. Women were considered to be less intellectual than their male counterparts and therefore any attempt by the part of women to establish their place in the intellectual domain was not regarded as legitimate political exercise.

The Caribbean islands have also seen same kinds of slave trade, rape, plantation work almost exactly in the same way that had to face by the African Americans. That was because the same traders were working everywhere. When British and other European administrations started to declare the slave trade as illegal in the Caribbean Islands (Slave Trade Act 1807) the plantation depending on the slave power felt a great set back. The wealthy plantation owners could no longer employ the slaves in the fields. So they began to 'hire' unskilled poor people as indentured labourers from Indian subcontinent especially from India and China to continue the plantation as Coolie/Cooly/kuli. In real life as well as in academia and literary world black coloured people were denied of justice.

This scenario has begun to change very recently. Now women are receiving more critical attention than they ever had in the past. A continuous struggle in the academia as well as in public life has begun to bring successes. Patricia Hill Colins in her book *Black Sexual Politics* (2004) proposes a ground breaking theory that earlier definition of "gender scholarship" which says that 'sex' is a biological product and 'gender' is a 'social construction' is inadequate. For her biological 'sex', 'social construction' and 'sexual orientation' are distinct ideas yet interconnected with each other in a way that in turn it would affect the idea of race and racial discrimination. She also suggests that worldwide academic intelligentsia, which is primarily dominated by White people, is promoting abstract theories of gender equality only to keep the 'black feminists' away from active fight against it. In *Sisters in the Struggle, African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (2001) edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin describes the lives and works of various African American women activists and how institutions like National Association of Colored Women (NACW), National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) have come into existence. The entire book is not only about the celebration of the historical black consciousness in the USA but also how the role of women, whose voluntary sisterhood would have created a strong resistance in the face of white Americans as well as black male members of the society, inevitably would lead towards, and finally create a black feminist consciousness across the world. Audre Lorde in her *Sister Outsider* (1984) proposes the idea that woman has a special power that is deep and dark inherent within herself and named it 'erotic'. Beside this, she offers another idea that like women, men are also the victims of Patriarchy. The only difference is that women have understood this fact very early and raised war against this evil power but men are still crawling in their innocent but poisonous slumber.

In the Caribbean though they started to express their voices of frustration, injustice as well as success from very early time it is only 1950s, 60s and after, when almost all the Caribbean islands gained freedom from the European bondage, they poured their heart into artistic creation more powerfully than ever. Some people further migrated to the European countries like England, France and America for better opportunity and better living. In that case they never limited themselves only on the experience of Caribbean, but they expanded, compared and rewritten it with that of the experience of London, Paris and New York lives. It is almost always true that women get less opportunity in patriarchal society but because of the inherent quality of 'womanness' and the life long experience of various kinds of suppression they have gradually become internally strong as well as poetically reflective. That is probably true because when society gives less scope for self expression in public sphere women choose subtle way of contemplation through art. Caribbean poetry, some of which have special references to African culture, retained their performance style. Poetry is written not merely for the sake of writing but they would perform it in front of a large audience and interact with them. Every performance differs from each other. Thus this poetry is never completed but written each time in a performance with the audience. African traditions of oral culture — folk lore, story-telling and many other forms of performances have direct influence on the performance poetry of the Caribbean poets.

The four representative women poets – Grace Nichols, Jean "Binta" Breeze, Maya Angelou and Rita Dove have approached the racial issues as well as the contemporary socio-political issues from their own different perspectives. It would be completely unfair and unjust to

categorize them and their poetic achievements, but we could, at least, discuss some of their poems to get some ideas about how they have seen the world and how poetry helped them to claim their identities through self-fashioning. These poets have undertaken several journeys in their lifetime and wrote about various things, but here we would only discuss about their poems concerning race and ideas related to identity. While Grace Nichols focuses on the body shaming of the Western world to the culturally other 'bodies' like fat black woman's body, Rita Dove tries to save the sectarian world by the expression of art and the unity of love. While Jean "Binta" Breeze tries to make people aware about the injustices through her live performances Maya Angelou sends the messages of love and triumph among all diverse situations. The common weapon among all the four poets to fight against the cultural monstrosity is art and the belief that it would finally save the world.

In my research I would like to discuss the works of four selected poets among them two from the Caribbean and two from America. In the first chapter I would like to focus on the root causes of the racial conflict of black versus white, how these poets are addressing them, and how they are dealing with them. In the second chapter I would discuss the stereotypes, and 'myths' that were once created to control and sustain the entire system of slavery and later after the abolition of slavery and Independence how the modern stereotypes are still working. The third chapter would be about how the history of slavery has been distorted and sometimes culturally obliterated for better functioning of that inhuman system and how these poets are not merely revealing them but also they are trying to reconstruct alternate history. The last chapter would be about the use of language among African American and African Caribbean communities. A diverse community had to leave its linguistic identity and gradually made a new one which is partially survival strategy and partially resistance movement but at the same time it is capable of artistic expression. My query would be how these poets are dealing with linguistic barriers and at the same time converting them in favour of them for art. The research would like to discuss about how those four poets who having similar background and different treatment in socio-political scenario, are negotiating their positions as well as trying to shine as literary success in being cultural icon representing their distinct culture.

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